Speculations about "The Hook"— Bill Ellis Doesn't Need Any More Theoretical Concepts

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The title of Bill Ellis's paper leads us to believe that new light will be shed on the widespread popular legend reported by Indiana University students since 1955 and picked up by media treasure trove 'Dear Abby' in 1960. Unfortunately, however, his discussion of "The Hook" is not founded on new empirical data, to illuminate unnoticed dimensions of the narrative. It seems rather to be a pretext to express dissatisfaction with my approach to legend study. I would not respond to a personal complaint such as this, but I feel it is timely to inform a generation of young folklorists, for whom 'urban legend' and 'contemporary legend' have become household terms, about the beginnings of systematic legend study in the United States of which I have been a part.

I am pleased that Ellis summarized his disapproval of my work because it gives me the opportunity to clarify my position. I am grateful to editor Greg Kelley for inviting me to write an answer. *Folklore Forum* is the right arena to inform about the collaborative work I conducted with my students—narrators, collectors, and analysts—who helped me establish *Indiana Folklore* (1968-87) as "an organ . . . essentially devoted to first-hand collections" (Thompson 1968:3). It was in the classroom of the Indiana University Folklore Institute that I discovered the legend as the most relevant and viable genre of folklore in American society. Over the years, undergraduate classes and graduate seminars became exploratory laboratories to launch our specific kind of empirical legend research, description, and comparative analysis: a direction that made scientific study of legendry an important branch of modern folkloristics (Brunvand 1981:16). My appreciation in this effort is due to my former assistants Don Bird, Joseph Goodwin, and Sylvia Grider, archivist Janet Langlois, F101 instructors too many to list, and authors Ronald Baker, Frank de Caro, Bill Clements, Larry Danielson, John Gutowski, Gary Hall, John Wm. Johnson, Jim Leary, Sabina Magliocco, Bill McNeil, Ken Thigpen, Elizabeth Tucker, John Vlach, and Burt Wilson, illustrious scholars of American folklore.

I reported my findings (found outrageous to most traditional folklorists insisting on the rural and backward qualities of legends) first at

the American Folk Legend Symposium (Dégh 1971:55-68). I characterized (and interpreted) the legendry of young Americans in broad outlines (1971:62-68) as outlets and indicators of the processes of human maturation, among them the painful ambiguities between fear of and desire of sex, in conflict with accepted adult norms. The observation of Alan Dundes at the same symposium—that I made "no real attempt to interpret the content of the legend" but just surveyed it (Dundes 1971:29)—should not be understood as meaning that I am against drawing interpretive conclusions of my findings. It only meant that I did not believe the ethnographic data on "The Hook" was sufficient at that time to offer broad generalizations, beyond what the conscious mind could fathom, deep into the collective unconscious meanings of the human psyche. My description of "The Hook" was based on a handful of variants collected or told by my undergraduate students, along with earlier texts from the Folklore Archives. I selected the fullest for publication, the rest—forty-four in all, thirty from women, fourteen from men—were only listed, abstracting the specific content variables along with all information on sociocultural and situational context. Without ethnographically dependable collection and comparative data, how much, and what kind of interpretation would have been feasible?

I take interpretation more seriously than lay analysts who use psychoanalysis—as fortune tellers use cards, palms, tea leaves—to interpret folklore. But although folkloristic hypotheses may be strengthened by psychoanalytical confirmation, I am cautious to stay within my area of competence and leave depth interpretation to specialists. I did not go through a 'Lehranalyse,'[1] and my folkloristic fieldwork does not create an 'analytical situation'[2] for the purpose of offering up psychoanalytical revelations. I will not repeat the statement I made twenty years ago, concerning my view on the importance of cooperation between legend scholars and analytical psychologists, about the possible benefits of working out proper psychological examination methods applicable to legend research (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1973:50-54); but as a reminder, I will quote my observation concerning inadequacies of interpretation:

> Seemingly the simplest method that the researcher familiar with depth psychology can pursue is to interpret the collected texts. In this manner it is possible to reach witty, sparkling, shocking, surprising, and even sometimes correct interpretations. Nevertheless, this method has a basic weakness. The researcher appends his own associations to the texts and not those of the folklore informant. . . . There is no clear measure of the extent to which the interpretation characterizes the informant (and the legend) and from what point it characterizes the interpreter himself. There are no general, stable "Freudian symbols"; no one can be absolutely sure of how much of the legend he has encoded and how much he has revealed of his own self, for instance, with the

> persistent interpretation of high towers as phallic symbols. . . . This method, arbitrary by definition, can become in certain cases the parody of psychoanalytic interpretation" (1973:51).

To interpret a masterfully crafted horror legend about violence against women as merely the commonplace expression of the inevitable and expected sexual initiation, as Michael P. Carroll did in his analysis of "The Roommate's Death," is a case in point (Carroll 1992:225-35).

Of course, my article "The Hook," in the first issue of *Indiana Folklore,* represented an early attempt to establish a type, not to force an interpretation without adequate supporting data. There was yet very little known about legends of the industrial world; most of the recordings were scattered in the papers of English composition classes at universities around the country. The first issue of *Indiana Folklore* presented a carefully chosen set of current legends collected by college students in my Introduction to Folklore classes, legends which were analyzed by myself and graduate students in my Legend seminar. We searched for parallels by sifting through the Institute's Folklore Archives that held a great variety of student collections—mostly abstracts or stylized stories with little contextual information. Under the given conditions (unfortunately, not much has changed; during my recent visit to major folklore archives, I still found mostly truncated, rewritten texts), *Indiana Folklore* has kept its focus on the determination and description of the extent of legend types and their main ramifications on the basis of local, national, and international text variants. In order to establish the ethnographic milieu of legends necessary for the scholarly analysis of folklorists, the recording of live telling was attempted, and information was sought concerning the identity of tellers and participants, the conditions and situations of telling, and the meaning of legends to bearers, indicative of religion and worldview. Our format of collection, description, and analysis was shaped during the years as we discovered diverse formulations and uses of legends; this format was meant to serve as a model for legend study. By discovering the phenomenon of ritual visits to legend sites, and by examining the style of verbal and dramatical recital, the enactment of legends and related behaviors, we set the stage for further enhancement of legend study.

Bill Ellis gives me credit for "launching the empirical study of the genre" (meaning the so-called 'contemporary legend'), publishing *Indiana Folklore*, and calling attention to "traditional adolescent lore." My collaborators and I intended more than that. We wanted to call attention in general to the American folk legend (contemporary as much as any folklore act is contemporaneous when observed). Indiana University students—my informants and collaborators—were young adults, ages eighteen and up to forty, who collected from all age and occupational groups of males and

females. Adolescents—between puberty and maturity—weren't driving cars to enjoy 'legend trips' (described first by Gary Hall in 1973, and adapted as 'legend tripping' by Ellis) and related, sexually motivated horror-thrills. It is true that age groups are not isolated from each other and that very young children may also tell stories overheard from older siblings or adults; however, the legend repertoire of children, preteens, and teens was motivated more by supernatural fear than by sexual encounter, as described in the Ph.D. dissertations of Elizabeth Tucker and Sylvia Grider, and in the articles of John Vlach, Kenneth Thigpen, Jim Leary, and others.

But to return to "The Hook," Ellis's article is a reaction to my criticism of his treatment of a tape-recorded conversation used in his argument for the importance of the production of "verbatim" texts for legend study (Ellis 1987:31-60; Dégh 1991: 11-38). In my essay, I found his transcript inadequate for interpretation for the following reasons: (1) an induced legend-telling session was set up by a student in Ellis's class. Following instructions, the female student in her early 20s invited two of her childhood friends. Between giggles, screams, teasing, false starts and asides by the three girls, no coherent legend emerged, and no legend teller claimed the floor to construct a story. References to and commentaries concerning "The Hook" indicate that the three friends were familiar with the legend, but people unfamiliar with it would not have been able to learn what it was by reading the transcript. (2) Information on participants was insufficient to relate text to the broader context. That is, the informants did not display a specific attitude provoked by the legend during the conversation that would be different from any other encounter and social interaction between peers. (3) The transcript, structured according to Labov and Waletzky's scheme of narrative syntax, and using available keys in the printer's set to indicate the speaker's rhythm, pauses, pitch, breathing, stress, and other vocal devices, represented only the linguistic part of the performance, and was not accompanied by indicators of body language, proxemics, or other intricacies of signs accompanying speech that construct a total folkloric performance.

I wholeheartedly agree that the recording of spontaneous (emergent) legend telling is desirable, but this situation is seldom accessible to the folklorist. Legends do not require the kind of planned get-togethers as do tales told for entertainment by skilled raconteurs. They erupt unexpectedly, unplanned, under diverse conditions. But we need not worry: since oral legends communicated face-to-face in small groups are a faint reflection of mass-mediated legendry permeating the everyday lives of millions of people, folklorists are able to follow the channels of legend dissemination, variation and standardization through audio-visual and print media. I stand by my original claim that folklorists benefit little from the kind of "verbatim" transcript Ellis offers.

Interpretation for interpretation's sake is "not useful" (this truism is not judgmental as is Ellis's dictum about whose work with legends is useful and whose is not); it confuses and distorts the issues. For me, thorough ethnographic description—the interaction of tellers and listeners on the basis of historic and sociocultural foundations—is necessary for the understanding of what the *bearers* interpret, not I. This is a principle that guided me and that I am committed to, whether it concerns old-fashioned village storytelling, discussion of UFO-experience accounts on TV talk shows, or legends by correspondence in response to Jan Brunvand's syndicated column. Thorough documentation is indispensable for a search of meaning. We may take the symbols signifying the projections of the unconscious mind for granted, without restating the obvious, the commonly known. Folklorists true to their learned trade should be concerned with the cultural meanings of legends, which differ individually and socially as many times they are repeated. When the 8th Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research put "meaning" on its agenda, in 1984, several of the plenary session speakers addressed this issue (see Röhrich 1985:3-28; Holbek 1987). Folklore lives in its variants; it is the mission of folkloristics, through rigorous ethnographic analysis, to establish the meanings which individuals and groups infuse into the formulaic texts. The repeated appeal of Alan Dundes that we interpret our data should be taken seriously in the sense that we should invite "oral literary criticism" (Dundes 1966), but the interpretation should come from the folk, not us.

In his article, Bill Ellis does not insist on the 'verbatim' issue I criticized. Instead, he elaborates further his 1987 interpretation of "The Hook." With reference to variants and related enactments, to comments of tellers and collectors, he illuminates "The Hook" in the light of his latest narrowing down of the definition of the so-called 'contemporary' legend. Ellis makes here a surprisingly new conclusion. He places the 'contemporary legend' within the hierarchy of the master genre 'legend,' as a subcategory, and claims that its distinctive feature is to be "emergent"—whereas he claims "The Hook" is a parody, functioning primarily as entertainment, and therefore is static. Does this conclusion not contradict what has been acknowledged as an essential attribute of folklore: that it lives in its variants? *Any* folklore is emergent because it manifests from relevant sociocultural conditions that we study because they give us the clues to explain its nature. "Static" folklore means irrelevant, temporarily or permanently defunct, that is, nonexistent, dead (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1973:8-11).

What are the data that support his reasoning? In order not to open a can of worms about the usefulness of increasing the already exceeding number of subcategories of the legend suggested on the basis of diverse principles, I will limit myself to explaining the origin of the articles Ellis

cites. Some of my collaborators in the '70s and the '80s pointed out the ambiguity expressed by legend tellers in certain kinds of legends. Vlach, Clements, Grider, Magliocco, and Tucker in particular touched upon the connection of the legend to playful humor, punning, and joking. Morbidity, the grotesque, the funny (the "funny-scary"), the anti-legend, black humor, etc., are obvious expressions of the diversity of sentiments that surround the legend. But ambiguity is in the character of the legend. It explains the world as a fearful experience between life and death, and questions the true nature of our existence. It allows the horrible to be diverted, sometimes magically, by turning it into absurdity. This is a natural measure of protection and does not change the essential extranormal concern of the legend. The same legend may end both tragically and humoristically, depending on the teller (Clements 1969:3-10). On the other hand, the behavior of young girls waiting in line in front of a Halloween spookhouse has nothing to do with legend behavior. The spookhouse is a show, as Sabina Magliocco expertly described: "it offers a chance to experience fear in a controlled environment and to derive pleasure from overcoming the anxiety" (Magliocco 1985:26). I hope that Bill will reconsider his *deus-ex-machina* interpretation.

"We have archives of data" and "we don't need any more theoretical concepts"—what an optimistic statement. But then: "We lack the tools to hear what our sources are telling us." I am afraid the tools of Bill Ellis are hard of hearing. According to a Hungarian proverb, the good clergyman's learning is lifelong—so should ours be as folklorists. My understanding of the legend is based on consistency in observation of the here and now, in pursuit of its process as it spreads to millions on diverse conduits—print, newswire, telephone, television, and sometimes, in exceptional lucky moments, spontaneous oral conversation. My theoretical propositions are rooted in empirical research; but without theoretical thinking, observation would be unsystematic, unmethodical. Theory is not "l'art pour l'art"; it is a guide to learning.

I disagree with the statement: "No one would deny that the discipline of folklore has been tarnished in the United States by the eagerness of folklorists to use the term 'urban legend.'" I feel that the concentrated effort of British and American folklorists, fellow travelers from other disciplines as well as amateur enthusiasts ought to be congratulated for noticing the legend's extraordinary impact on life in industrial culture. Evidently, their tremendous work also produced misconceptions, errors, and inadequacies. No wonder fellow folklorists raise eyebrows asking: what is it that you are doing? Aren't you deviating from the canon? (For example, see Petzoldt 1989:122-127.) But not only Europeans feel the need of clarification. During the 1992 spring term, academically trained folklorists of California asked Alan Dundes and me to present the case of current research in "Rumor, Gossip, and Urban Legend." Bob Georges, the mediator, stated:

"it seems appropriate at this time for folklorists to look critically and analytically at what is going on in 'urban' or 'contemporary' legend research, both in the United States and abroad. . . . What kinds of questions or specific questions can/should *folklorists'* studies of rumor, gossip, and legend address, and why?" (UCLA, May 1992). Uncertainties are to be expected: entering the modern industrial world, we are not well equipped with methods, theories, and techniques; and making them on the ground of new exploration takes time.

Finally, I am not perturbed by Ellis's accusation that I agree with Heda Jason; I had been surprised by his angry rebuttal to Jason's polite criticism of the publications of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research (Jason 1990; Ellis 1991; a somewhat milder, insular response from Bennett 1991). The comments and suggestions of Jason, an internationally distinguished veteran scholar, could have generated discussions and new guidelines for modern legend research. As an American member of the Society, I feel good about being quoted as agreeing with Jason: the "'Jason-esque' research paradigm" and "theory-driven approach" (as self-proclaimed monoglot Bennett named it [1991:187]) make lots of sense. It is time to decide what is legend and what is only noise from the street.

Notes

1 Lehranalyse—the analytical training which psychoanalysts have to undergo, in which they themselves submit to analysis.

2 Analytical situation—interpreted by Freud as the pact between the analyst and the weakened ego of the patient.

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